



Thank you to all of our incredibly talented contributors for making this project possible! We couldn't be prouder to finally release this zine after 4+ months of hard work.

Us mods want to give a very special thank you to Cara (@octovocado on Instagram) for designing our beautiful cover!

While this zine is free, we also want to extend an opportunity to any viewers of this zine to donate to the (insert charity/organization here)!

>>(https://truecolorsunited.org)<<

True Colors United is an organization dedicated to ending homelessness in LGBTQ+ youth. LGBTQ+ youth are 120% more likely to experience homelessness than their CisHet peers, and True Colors United is dedicated to combating this. Please consider donating to support their cause!

And with that, we hope you'll thoroughly enjoy A Little Help From My Friends: A Homestuck Fanzine!



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VOGUE

**TREND
WATCHING**
page 16

11 - Makeup by
longtime YSL
exec

19 - Diamonds:
Cuts, shapes,
colors, and all
you need to know
prior to investing

**LEATHER'S
page 23 BITTER
END**

How the
industry is
panning leather
sales and what
that means for
the "future of faux"

**SPOTLIGHT
ON SAKS**
page 34

DUO TO *page 12*
DIE FOR

Hollywood's own
siblings D. Strider
and R. Lalonde
join us for an
exclusive fashion
spill-all

15 - How the
world of Versace
turned upside
down

27 - Hot trends
from around the
globe this winter

A-Z JEWELRY:
What's in?
What's out?

6 - Hottest lipsticks
for the coming year

Reassurance Over Bathroom Sinks

Mari
@reviewmi

An overwhelming loneliness washed over Roxy's lanky figure as he stood and watched his friends fade away with the dimly whipping wind. Left alone, he had nothing to do but kick around at the pitch black sand beneath his feet and long for someone to come and find him. However, in this void of nothing but solitude and a relentless darkness. They sat down on the nearly invisible grain that covered the ground, stuffing their hands in it up until it reached his elbows. Holding his breath, the Lalonde plugged his nose with his thumb and forefinger and dove backwards, submerging himself in the black sand. Swiftly, he sank, and sank.

And then he woke up, drops of sweat flinging upward along with his upper body. He glanced around anxiously, using the back of his hand to wipe away the rest of the sweat from his forehead and upper lip. Roxy looked towards the window, cocking his head in a concerned manner once he realized that it wasn't early in the morning like they had thought originally. It had to be only eight.. or nine in the evening. Their neck cramped from the uncomfortable position their head was in as he slept and he winced. He was folded up like some shitty quality mall pretzel, overheated from the thick cable-knit blanket that was draped over them. Quietly, they kicked it off their legs, unsure if everyone was asleep or not. Once all of Roxy's senses returned to their full and normal function, he noticed the two heads pressed against each other below him. Nosily, they poked their head over to see what they were doing.

The sound of video game music blared from the small handheld console being shared by both Jade Harley and the other lalonde - Roxy's darling sister - Rose. Both of their cheeks were squished together as they tried to read at the same time. Harley was quite expressive, and showed that, by waving her hands wildly about whenever a familiar character - in this specific moment, a german prosecutor possessing a whip, reappeared after a period of absence. The trial music changed to a more pursuit-style tune and both girls went crazy. Roxy chuckled silently, moving his eyes to the open corridor so they could check on the other two. From where he was seated he could see the kitchen, and the chair where June was seated, chatting with Kanaya. They both giggled and sipped small mugs of coffee as they gossiped about random things that would come up in their heads. Egbert tucked a tuft of her hair back behind her ear and her side profile became much more visible which made Lalonde giggle a bit. Maryam's expression was warm and tender, like how a mother would look at their beloved daughter. It made Roxy happy.

Unsure on how to enter any conversation, he simply cleared his throat, and the much taller girl below them tilted her head up and smiled, pushing her big round glasses back up the bridge of her nose. She waved and set the game down, nudging Rose so she would acknowledge her sibling.

"Hi Rox! Was your nap good? We're going to play some games in a little bit if you want to play with us. Card games! And then we'll eat snacks and watch a movie... you can help us pick out which one!"

Dizzy from all the sudden conversation, Roxy did nothing but blink and nod. A small smile spread across his face though, happy that she was interacting with them so much. It helped him get the nightmare he had off of his mind.

"Er... Jade darling, don't you think you should give them some space for a second? He DID just wake up after all, and frankly, I'm surprised he didn't wake up earlier when you were squealing over some.. women lawyers..?"

"HEY! I wasn't squealing! Just talking excitedly because I like them and I REALLY like this game franchise as well! They do a wonderful job with their character design if I'm being completely honest. And you know I would never tell a lie. Scout's honor, Rose Lalonde!" Jade closed her eyes and placed her hand on an imaginary bible, raising her right hand to imitate taking an oath. Rose laughed and pushed her playfully.

"Now that you guyssss are all done with your gaaaayyyy arguiiinnggg..." Roxy teased, "I can answer what you wanted me to answer in the first place. I would be more than happy to play games and pick out movies with you four, as long as that's cool with you." Both of the girls agreed, and he smiled before getting up and stretching his upper body and arms out.

With a few long strides, they were in the kitchen, being waved over by the other two girls in there. He smiled and waved at them, making his way towards them both quickly. Roxy's arms wrapped around June's shoulders from behind, and sleepily reached over to grab Kanaya's hand and hold it for a minute as a unique half-passed out greeting. June patted the top of their head and scooted a chair over to the side, giving Lalonde room to sit down and talk with both her and Kanaya. He took a seat and watched as they resumed their conversation. Kanaya spoke with such eloquence, even when she wasn't trying to come off as such, a trait that both her and Rose shared. He could fall asleep to her kind and soft voice. And they almost did, snapping back to reality when he registered the calling of his name.

"Roxy Lalonde,"

"Kanaya Maryam," they joked.

She chuckled, setting her mug down carefully with both hands. "How are you? You looked and acted a bit restless as you slept, June and I both took note." Kanaya tilted her head at a gentle angle, holding steady eye contact with Roxy.

"Oh, I'm okay, just had a bit of a bad dream is all - "

"Bad dream? What? Are you alright?!" Concerned howls from the girl beside Roxy sprung up in volume quickly and she turned to face him, furrowing both of her brows. Egbert was an empathetic and caring type of girl, she showed a lot of affection towards her friends, which all of them gratefully accepted. He waved her away, chuckling nervously as their hand reached up behind them to rub the back of their neck. "Yeah, I think I'll be fine. It was just a bit... nerve wracking, I guess."

Maryam stayed silent, her eyes staring right into what seemed like Roxy's soul. Her delicate hands folded neatly on top of each other beneath her chin, and she rested it there for support. Lalonde's eyes flicked back and forth between her and June over and over again, before he finally decided to start some more conversation. June was still worried, but after being pushed away, she backed off from all the therapist-registered nurse-one man band muck, and listened.

But, there was nothing but silence.

"...Actually, I think I would like to discuss the dream that I had, just a little bit."

"Oh?" Kanaya's head perked up suddenly,

her eyebrows raising with slight surprise and obvious interest. The other girl present reacted strangely as well, more expressing her discomfort with the idea. "You said it was a nightmare, right?" June sighed, "I don't want you to be uncomfortable with recalling it."

"I'll be completely fine!"

The troll nodded along with him, to back Roxy up. Egbert stood up and placed a supportive hand on their shoulder, grabbing her coffee mug with the other free hand. "Well, I do not particularly like nightmares - or hearing about them for that matter, so I'm going to go see what Jade and Rose are doing. I love you both! And.. I'm sure Kanaya can give you better insight on what might be happening in that brain of yours better than I ever will." She giggled and walked off, rinsing out her mug and skipping towards the other room.

Now, it was just Roxy Lalonde and Kanaya Maryam left in the kitchen.

To be completely honest, they didn't mind all that much when June left. While he thrived and prospered in groups with more people, it was also a nice feeling to be able to confide in someone alone for a little while, and to be able to have someone specific that they could come to and fully trust. That was his bond with the Virgo, not exactly super close and intimate but strong enough to have meaningful conversations with. She had good qualities and was easy to talk to, even if her vocabulary was a lot more extensive.

"About that nightmare."

"Huh?" Roxy zoned out for a moment, snapping back into reality when she spoke. Her eyebrow raised curiously, which made him even more nervous. There was another awkward silence, so Lalonde could fully comprehend what was going on.

"Was it really bad?"

"Um.. bad? I dunno, you should probably give me your definition of bad. I don't think it was THAT bad, just a little frightening, maybe slightly scarring.. horrible.. absolutely petrifying even! But I don't really think it was that bad,ahaha."

"Roxy." Kanaya reached her arm out to grab his fidgety hands and hold them tightly so she could give reassurance. "You can just say that it was bad, you had a bad nightmare. We all get them, some worse than others.." pointedly, she looks toward the room where Rose is. "Nonetheless, this is not a competition for who has the most traumatic stories unfold while they sleep. I am here to listen, and to help, so tell me what happened and I will do the best that I can."

He sucked in his breath through his teeth sharply, feeling quite nervous to tell this story. It was hard to remember everything that happened in the nightmare, but the big parts were still fresh in their mind. Roxy finally explained it to him, as best he could - the black sand, all their friends fading away with the loud, whipping wind, the feeling of being alone and how it felt just like when he suffocated in the sand, how sad it all was. She listened to every last word that they had to say, and when he finished his recollection, took some meaningful pauses before she spoke.

"I'm sure you already know this, but, what happened in that nightmare was not real, is not real, and never will be real." He did know that, but part of him didn't want to believe it. All they could do was nod in return.

Words were not her strong suit, contrary to popular belief.

Maryam's vocabulary was somewhat extensive, maybe more than the average person, but when it came to things like these she was the worst at using any words of affirmation. So, she opted to go the other route. Kanaya put a hand up to their face and brushed her slim thumb against his cheek. "Come with me, over here."

Roxy stood up and was quickly whisked away by the taller troll, walking into a bathroom and shutting the door. He sat on the counter that extended past the sink, watching contently as Kanaya thought of what to do. She turned on the faucet, just a tad - turning the knob far left to get the water nice and warm. Once it heated up, she made a cup with her fingers and held the water in her hands for a moment, letting it leak out of the inevitable holes in her makeshift glass. Then, her damp hands went up to caress Lalonde's tender face once again, with touches of nothing but love and gentle care. Taken aback by the sudden touch, Roxy jumped and questioned what she was doing, but once they felt the warmth on their face everything seemed to fizzle out.

The temperature and the touch reminded them of home, of waking up to a bright sunrise, of getting a nice breakfast every morning either made by himself or his housemates. Small things came back to him too - like the sounds of text boxes in the game Rose and Jade were playing together, how socks slid on slick wood flooring, how his sister smiles at everything he says.

The warmth was overwhelming, it made him laugh... and it made him cry. The seated one tried to wipe their own tears away but Kanaya swatted his hand, wrapping her arms around them and kissing the top of their head. It was a short and quick experience, but it was heartfelt.

"Sometimes, in situations like these, I am not sure of what to say. Rose is much better with that than I am. But, I do know what to do." She smiled, rubbing their back. "When we are at a loss for words, but have another way to comfort someone, go for the comfort. Even if it's lightly washing their face in a bathroom sink, or playing some sort of obscure game with them, you know them best."

"I know you, Roxy Lalonde," Maryam spoke softly, low into his ear. "You are my loved one, my friend."

"I will never leave you and disappear behind the gusts of whipping wind. None of us will, Roxy."



Iz @soukcyc



Bee @seraphfemme

"dream sweet in c major"



Jade @lamqchops



Mars @_tamajikis

Petals in a gust

Brie
@bringlesw

The setting couldn't be more perfect, Rose thought to herself.

A reserved table sat just outdoors of a quiet cafe -quiet enough to be intimate, busy enough to not feel empty- with just enough eyes present to witness what was happening, keeping the tone consistent by acting as a barrier to more rash post-confession action. June was a long time companion and friend, sure, but Rose was set on this. They could be so much more together, and tonight was the night she'd make that come to light.

Rose had become quite the romantic after her blooming relationship with Kanaya. Rose adored learning all the intricacies and quirks of troll-human love, as she did the troll herself. However after expressing concerns for her own potential promiscuity, Kanaya shut down her doubts by firmly stating that what she wanted more than anything else in the world was for Rose's fantasies to be experienced outside of her imagination. Rose was quick to question if she was simply jealous of her ancestor again, to which the troll huffed and puffed As Articulately As One Could Possibly Do So, insisting that she was being sincere.

While those two's relationship was a slow burn into a fiery explosion that she loved reminiscing many times over, Rose remained thoroughly perplexed over her feelings towards June; And even more than this, her... relationship, if all went well...

Rose was infamous for carrying herself extraordinarily well, rivaled only by her troll partner. She was smart, well spoken, and polite all while still being able to convey her intentions as well as she could hide them. This demeanor was pushed to its absolute limits when talking with or discussing June Egbert. The air-headed air heir would seemingly inspire feelings of every kind within her, both predisposed to be good and bad. For Rose however, these were welcomed feelings. Ones that she didn't get much chance to feel otherwise.

A flurry of emotions fought within her -anxiety, excitement, anticipation, and fear- causing Rose to feel as if she was outwardly out of character. Perhaps she wasn't as cool-headed as she thought, despite the fact that she was trying her best to act as if she was plainly unaffected. Maybe it was some sort of defence mechanism? She felt as if she was standing beneath a spotlight just trying to sit normally in front of the occasional carapacian customer or cafe worker. Everybody who knew her name, knew her personality, her standards, how she was expected to act- She was struggling to determine whether it was her seer abilities or clouded judgement screaming at her that today was the day her image would be shattered. Not that she even particularly cared much for it in the first place. She knows of her capabilities better than anyone else, who cares what others think of her? It was normal to feel such intensity when confronting another person you have feelings for! Most people don't get a set of stairs in a dark corridor to have a sloppy first kiss on, this is normal! This is how it is! Normalcy!

The nearby carapacians, even with their limited understanding of human body language, took note of the beaded sweat pouring down the woman's brow. She felt their concerned gazes. Do they even know who they are looking at?

They are looking at one of the smartest, most powerful, most humble people currently alive! Maybe even THE most humble!

Oh gods, she was angry. She'd worked herself up. No, it was June! She did it again! Goddamnit, June!!

As if she had unlocked seer powers of her own and sensed her name being cursed, June opened the door to the cafe on cue. Rose couldn't help but indulge thoughts, perhaps fantasies, of what hijinks could ensue. She could blow up at her, say something ridiculous like "June Egbert! Why did you have to come through that door NOW of all times!!" to which June would probably respond "Because you invited me here! And I'm on time! And I'm sat right in front of you! Rose? Rose??"

"Rose!!" Tonight was going to be much harder than the seer had anticipated. She didn't even have time to register whatever was happening in her imagination before she was ripped out of it.

"June! Hello, June. How are you doing this evening?" She was immensely unsure of herself. Had she gotten back into the groove? Did she at least appear to be in the groove all along? She didn't want to undersell June's intellect, but there was a good chance June didn't even notice. No, no, she can't be rude to her like that, they're on a date! But that doesn't really matter, does it? June can't see inside Rose's head. Alright, the most straightforward thing to do is to simply entertain the chance that June didn't notice, therefore calming Rose at least somewhat. Quick thinking to the rescue.

"Rose?" Oh, shit. June said something. She's looking inquisitive, and she's holding the menu in one hand, slightly turned to face Rose.

Not much time has passed, she probably just responded with how she was feeling and followed up with "How are you?"

"I'm fine!"

"Oh... if you aren't super hungry then do you at least want something snacky to share?" What??? Why the hell was she asking about ordering food already?? Has she never been on a date before? This etiquette is appalling, she must've picked it up from Karkat and... Dave. Rose did her best to yell "Strider" inside her own head, hoping it would relieve some stress.

It didn't.

"Well, perhaps I will feel hungrier by the time the food arrives. Maybe even perusing the menu will offer me some pangs of desire; I hadn't looked yet."

"Aw, but wouldn't getting something to share be nice though?? I love the little games of area control that happen in a bowl of nachos!"

"Hmhmhm, June you are as chipper as ever. I'll order some, though you should know that if it's mind games you're looking to play, you're against a Lalonde."

"I'm sneakier than you think! I can steal nachos from your side and you won't even notice." She grinned upon saying that. Rose deemed it not worth critiquing, as an infiltrator who announces their plan is much easier to combat. Instead, she opted to smile back.

Now this was new. Their eyes met. Rose hadn't really paid any attention to June's body language yet; it was different. More intimate. She was really leaning in, and her usually overbearing and emotive arms were more restrained, more tactile.

And she'd done her makeup. And her hair. She was gorgeous. Rose had never seen her looking this good, and it was dawning on her that June had chosen to look this pretty for a hangout that she didn't even know was a date. Unless...?

June leant back, pressing into her chair and earning a creak from it. She heaved a long, heavy sigh, seemingly preparing for something, and spoke.

"Rose, uh... I'm really happy you brought me out here." No way. Is this seriously happening? Her body language, her huff of anticipation, the subtle lilt she applied to the latter half of her sentence... Is the Egbert really about to confess first?

"I was hoping you could help me out with some... difficult feelings." She lifted her hand to her head and twisted it to the side as she talked.

"Oh, June. I had some difficult feelings of my own I was intending to discuss with you, but I'd much rather hear you out first." Rose cooed, placing her head upon a hand with its arm resting on the table. Perhaps she'll get the hint, and take the brunt of the flustering embarrassment that comes with declarations of love.

"How... how do I get into a relationship with a girl?" Promising...

"How indeed! It depends most upon who it is you're trying to get with. Pray tell, who is the lucky lady you've got your eyes on?" Rose did some head twisting of her own, flashing a smirk at the already stumbling June. Having somebody else struggle to articulate themselves really eased a lot of the pressure Rose had placed on herself. Er, sorry, that June had placed on her.

"Ah- well, it's... it's you, Rose, but..."

"But what?" Rose took advantage of her replenished cool headed nature to hear out June rather than blurting out her love, despite the temptation.

"I'm already in a relationship. You know that. But..."

"Oh, June. Are you really hung up on staying in one relationship?"

"I have been hung up on it!! For like, months!! I really wanna be with you!"

"Dave and Karkat aren't holding you back. Well, they shouldn't be; they're both in their own relationships too, separate to each other."

"But that's a troll thing!! I mean,"

"Polyamory is not a troll exclusive trait, June. Dave is not a troll. Calm down."

"Oh... you're right, but..."

"Mmm?"

"I just don't think I can handle more? Not right now at least. I really really trust you, so that's why I came to you about this. I really want a girlfriend, and, for that girlfriend to be you, but I have two boyfriends already!! How many people have ever got to even have two boyfriends at once!"

"Lots of people, June. I can tell you feel greedy, selfish even, but that isn't the case. I want to be more intimate with you, and I know both Dave and Karkat would want you to be happy above all else. Nobody but you is objecting to this."

"Wait, what do you mean when you say more intimate? Does that mean girlfriend?"

Rose lets out a small sigh, and chuckles, bringing up her other hand to rest her chin upon both.

"Boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife, they're all absolute labels made up by a dead society to show absolution and devotion in one's actions. Humans were obsessed with the upkeep of these labels, and what terms had to be met for those with those labels. We don't have to worry about it anymore. The humans never had to. In fact, polyamory was commonplace in egalitarian society before those looking to control others' morals deemed it abhorrent."

"R... Rose, what does this mean for me...?"

"What it means for us, June, is that we can be intimate without the need for formal old-world terms and conditions. We're both in love, and we should strive to be as comfortable as possible. Please don't think of us as needing to fulfill each other's needs to the fullest."

At that, June began tearing up. As quickly as the first bead rolled down her cheek, she was huffing and puffing, sniffing occasionally.

"So does... that mean... you're my girlfriend...?"

"June, I just--" No. The terms may have been upheld as limiters, but they aren't problematic on their own. And June is very clearly emotionally attached to them, using them endearingly.

"...Yes, June. We're girlfriends." Rose smiled softly upon saying that, relishing the feeling of finally being able to communicate in her long-term crushes language of love.

"Girlfriends...? We are... we... I'm..."

"Hah, did I strike up the gender based euphoria again? Yes, June. You are a woman. And you are my girlfriend, as I am yours." With that, June began sobbing happily into her arms, Rose getting up to take to her side in a gentle, comforting embrace.



Forest @nocturneforest



demonic.boi_mike

Mike @demonic.boi_mike



Castus @taffyokai



Dav @electraslight +
Petrus @Pedacin.detorta



Zilly @ziwwyhoo

Idiots in a Market

Bean
A03: @beanstalks

"Fef, what," Eridan forced through gritted teeth. He had ripped his door open and was angrily glaring at Feferi as he stood in his plush purple robe and slippers. Feferi dropped the rocks she'd been throwing at his window and smiled innocently. "I put my phone on silent so you couldn't interrupt my beauty sleep with your random adventures anymore!"

"Whale, this is finportant!" She grinned widely, and Eridan rolled his eyes, standing there for a moment before relenting as her smile melted his resistance.

"I'll be back," he sighed, darting off to his room to change.

"Bring money!" She called after him, hanging around in the doorway. Eridan returned a few minutes later in an expectedly pretentious outfit, and Feferi led the way back to her bright pink car.

"So, where are we goin' today?" Eridan asked once they were buckled. Feferi simply flashed her teeth, focusing on the road as he continued to pester her.

Eventually, Eridan realised where they were headed based on their surroundings, and instantly looked at Feferi in disgust, hand on the door handle. Feferi grinned at him, face bright as he bristled.

"Really. Out of everyone we could be goin' to visit, you're takin' me to see him?" He snarled, trying his door handle only to find it locked.

"He's nice! You're just overreacting," she replied, poking her tongue out at him. "Jumping out of my car is a bit extreme, Eridan." She pulled up and turned to him with a warning finger. "If I get back and you aren't here, I'm canshelling next week's pamper night." Eridan rolled his eyes and crossed his arms, slumping back in his seat with any escape attempt forgotten.

She pranced up to the large door and rung the doorbell a few times. After a minute or so, a dishevelled Sollux opened the door, rubbing his eyes. He smiled when he saw her, raising his hand in a wave.

"Hey, FF," he said, voice still grumbly from sleep. "Hang on, let me put some proper clothes on and I'll be ready." Feferi instructed him to bring money, and within a few minutes he was out the door behind her, only faltering for a moment when he noticed glaring eyes on him coming from her car.

"At least I get the front seat," Eridan remarked as they got in. Sollux ignored this, waving lazily.

"Hey ED."

"Hi," Eridan replied shortly, turning to Feferi and going back to his previous questioning. Feferi was tight-lipped, just smiling and saying a cryptic 'you'll sea' every now and then.

She took them to a place neither of them were familiar with, somewhere very far away from their usual cafes or salons. They were idly chatting away during the drive, granted with much more curt replies from Eridan, but the other two were used to him being like this before he decided to give in and have fun.

They pulled up and parked in a car park near a small city. Feferi put on her sunhat, jumping out of the car and gesturing for them to come with her. The other two followed cautiously, looking around at their surroundings.

Apartment buildings were rising up a few stories on either side of them as the path overtook the road. Streamers and bright coloured bunting crisscrossed the roads above their heads, the streets were bustling with trolls, all greeting each other and smiling. Eridan spared a grimace at the lowbloods surrounding them before catching up to Feferi, hissing a question of where they were. Instead of replying, she sped up. Eridan shot an eye roll in Sollux's direction, who just shrugged.

They rounded a corner, and Eridan's questions were answered

Little market stalls lined the plaza, countless arrays of items inside of them. They were packed in tightly, the trolls inside happily chatting to customers and each other. Eridan and Sollux took a moment to try and take it all in as a troll rushed up to Feferi and greeted her with a hug, thanking her for coming. They smiled happily at the other two, which made Eridan subconsciously shift closer to Sollux.

Eventually, the troll left with instructions for them to 'enjoy themselves!' and Feferi turned, grinning and clasping her hands together.

"So, this is where I wanted to take you! It's a nice little market with just about anything you could think of!" The two were frozen, and she raised her eyebrows expectantly. "Whale? Go on!" Sollux shuffled off, and Eridan made a big fuss out of rolling his eyes and dragging his feet towards the nearest somewhat-interesting stall.

It turned out to be an eye-catching shop full of jewellery that glittered in the moonlight. Eridan looked closer and noticed they were all handmade. Usually, he'd turn up his nose and make some comment about the imperfections but something about one piece in particular captivated him. Surrounded by various other gems and crystals was a necklace with a small teardrop amethyst. What drew him in was the small wave design above the stone, simple but intricate and well done. Eridan picked it up with a glance to the troll behind the stall who was watching him, barely withholding their glee.

He held it up to his neck and admired himself in the mirror laid out, immediately enamoured by how it looked. He turned to the troll and paid, still in shock about how perfect the necklace was.

A few stalls in the other direction, Sollux had found a little shop filled with what he dubbed 'shitty little trinkets'. He spotted something and whirled around, catching Feferi's eye and waving her over. He held up two plastic water pistols, smirking and raising an eyebrow. Feferi gasped, nudging his arm disapprovingly.

"Sollux! We can't do that to him!"

"Yes we can," he replied simply, buying them and moving over to the side, opening up the chamber for water and holding it out to her expectantly. She sighed, getting out the water bottle she carried with her at all times and filling them up, tutting.

"Alright! Fin! But if he gets my car wet you're cleaning it!"

They made their way over towards Eridan, but on the way Feferi spotted an even better water pistol, and bought it, claiming that 'if we're going to do this, we may as well do it right'.

She filled and handed it to Sollux and grabbed the tiny ones, dual-wielding them as Eridan came into view. Sollux put his hands in his pockets, floating the 'Mega Soaker 3000' in front of him. The people around them seemed to understand what was going on and cleared out. Eridan was so enveloped in the bonsai trees he was looking at that he didn't notice anything was different. As he made his way across to the other side of the lane, Feferi called him.

He looked up, a small smile on his face at the sound of Feferi's voice. He then noticed both his 'friends' (who would shortly be dropped to acquaintances) a small distance apart from each other. He also noticed he was looking down three different gun barrels. He held up his hands, backing away.

"Hey, guys? Can we talk this out? Maybe do literally anyfin e-" His pleading was cut off as the two looked at each other, nodded, and pulled their triggers. In the split second he had to act, he pulled up his cape to deflect most of Sollux's Mega Soaker's water, but unfortunately, this meant he was struck directly in the face from Feferi's angle... twice. She cackled as he screeched, and Sollux started guffawing as well as they both got a good look at his drenched face. Eridan glared at them both and was about to say something when Sollux shot him right in the mouth.

"That will make up for how little water he drinks!" Feferi said gleefully as Eridan spat.

"Smoothies and mineral water are healthy, Fef-" He was cut off again as Feferi shot him in the chest, and he clutched at it. "I just got this necklace!!" He shrieked, making eye contact with Sollux as he aimed a little lower. "Sol. Sol don't go for the dickshot." Sollux grinned, crossing his arms. "Sollux. Do not."

"Oooh, the full name!" Feferi giggled, shooting the rest of the contents of her water pistols up into the air so she could catch the liquid in her mouth. "Someone's in troooubleee~" Eridan rolled his eyes at her and began moving slowly towards Sollux with his hands up. Feferi watched with bated breath as Eridan slowly inched closer, maintaining eye contact with Sollux.

When he got close enough he could touch the pistol, he leaned in towards Sollux, who was staring at him with a dazed look in his eyes. Eridan whispered a simple but stern 'Solluxander' and before Feferi could yell out to warn Sollux, Eridan had snatched the pistol out of his mind-grip and shot the remaining water directly into Sollux's face. He spluttered, shaking his head to get rid of some droplets.

"Motherfucker!" He exclaimed, taking his glasses off to wipe them. Feferi, meanwhile, was doubled over with laughter.

"That's what you get for being gay, doofish!" She cackled while Eridan looked down at a soaking Sollux with a smug (but still wet) grin.

"I wasn't- That's not-" Sollux stuttered before sighing and giving up. He shoved Eridan gently and whispered an 'asshole' under his breath. Eridan turned to Feferi and narrowed his eyes.

"Wait, Fef is the only one who isn't sufferin'," he pointed out, and Sollux moved to put an arm on his shoulder, leaning on him and feeling some sense of pride when he didn't move away.

"Huh, you're right, ED," he agreed, and Feferi quickly stopped laughing.

"Hey. Guys," she said, holding out a finger in warning. "You're out of water." The two boys looked at each other, some kind of understanding

passing between them as they both surged forward and crushed her in a group hug. She screeched out a protest before sighing and squeezing them back.

"You both min-know I can't refuse a hug..." she whined, and they both laughed.

After drying themselves as best as they could, they set off walking together, buying a few things here and there and laughing and joking around. As expected, Eridan had warmed up to socialising. He was now the loudest of the three of them, avidly babbling about the things they found.

Sollux made an offhand comment about how his feet were starting to hurt, which meant Feferi immediately beelined towards the grassy eating area and claimed a table for them. She shooed them off to go find food, and after a while of deciding, they all made it back to their table, late lunches in hand.

At some point during their meal, a band set up and started playing songs by Troll One Direction. Feferi was gleefully dancing in her seat, and Sollux's foot was tapping. Eridan, however, refused to even acknowledge that the music was enjoyable, commenting about 'pop garbage'.

Feferi finished eating and immediately dragged Sollux to his feet, moving his arms and dancing with him. He grinned and started joining in, doing dorky moves like the robot. Eridan sat, a small smirk on his face as he judged their awful dance moves until he was interrupted by an enthusiastic Feferi pulling him up and dancing with him. He rolled his eyes, not budging until he looked to make sure there was no one they knew was around.

After Eridan was sure no one was going to embarrass him, he started letting go and dancing along with his friends. He was probably the most competent dancer there, but he was still clumsily

tripping over himself every now and then, laughing at the stupid dance moves the other two were pulling.

The band started playing some slower ballads, and Feferi took the chance to slow dance with Sollux, swapping to Eridan before shoving them together and dancing by herself. "Play nice!" was her only instruction as she waltzed off. Both of them froze up immediately, unsure of where to begin. After an awkward pause, Eridan cleared his throat, holding out his hands and beckoning for Sollux to join him.

"You don't know how to slow dance, do you?" He asked as Sollux wiped his hands on his pants before taking Eridan's hand. He shook his head as they both avoided eye contact. "O-okay, whale, we start like this," Eridan said, taking Sollux's other hand and placing it on his shoulder before returning to rest on his waist. "I'm leading, so you just mirror what I'm doing."

"What if I step on your fancy expensive shoes?" Sollux teased, actually looking at Eridan as he responded.

"I'll spare your life this time, bee-brain," Eridan mumbled, and they smiled at each other.

Sollux did step on Eridan's shoes a total of four times before he finally managed to get the hang of it. At this point, Feferi had made her way back over and tried to figure out how all three of them could dance together at the same time. She only gave up when the band had finished their set and was leaving, huffing about how rude it was that she couldn't dance with 'her buoys'.

They started wandering again, and Sollux found a stall that sold various kinds of Earth-honey and stopped to look at the selection they had laid out.

Eridan made several jabs about this until the troll running the stall came to greet them, surrounded by bees. Some of the bees buzzed over to him, interested in the floral pattern on his shirt that featured some bees. Feferi cooed, watching them bumble around and bump into him. Sollux smiled at this and purchased some honey, still slightly in awe of the bee-whisperer.

There was an inside part of the market, which mostly held stalls with handmade clothes. Sollux dragged his feet as the other two excitedly stepped in, ready to spend what would probably be a large chunk of their money on clothing.

After a large amount of time that would probably be skipped over via montage in a teen movie, Sollux had had enough of suffering through this alone. He was asked his opinion on WAY too many varying shades of purple and pink. He pulled out his phone and dialled the first number in his contacts.

"Sollux. Hi," she replied, and he immediately delved into a long tale of where they were and how everything sucked because his fishy friends wouldn't stop being addicted to trying things on and by the time he'd finished he wasn't really sure if Aradia was listening anymore.

"And now I'm sitting here while they try on-" he paused to glance up. "A glittery shirt and a shell dress, respectively." He sat for a moment before realising he wasn't very clear. "Feferi's in the dress. This time."

"Well! It sounds like you're all having fun," she said, and Sollux heard some scraping sounds.

"I'm not. That's the whole reason I called, AA," he sighed, hearing the scraping again. "What are you doing?"

"Oh! I'm using a toy excavation kit Tavros gave me to find a small dinosaur egg that I can then put in water to make it grow. It's a pretty decent gift."

"Ah."

"I hope I get a triceratops or megalodon. Say hi to Feferi for me, by the way!" Sollux sighed again, calling Feferi over and handing his phone to her. They started having an enthused conversation, which left Sollux to stare vacantly at whatever Eridan was trying on. After a few stupid exaggerated poses to get Sollux's attention, the two started exchanging weird poses in silence, grins on their faces. It was only when Feferi nudged him with his phone that they snapped out of it, going back to what they were doing as if nothing had happened.

"Hi," Sollux greeted.

"Hi!" Aradia replied, and Sollux could hear her smile still on her face from talking to Feferi. "Fef told me you did some dancing with Eridan?" Sollux let out a loud sigh, already seeing where this was going. "Are you going to stop bickering with him so we can finally go on that double date without you destroying the place?"

"Alright, bye AA," he replied, hanging up as she protested. Betrayed by his only escape, he was left to blink and watch as the other two paraded around excitedly. He guessed there was a charm to how invested they were in the fabric.

Sollux had to sacrifice some of his dignity to drag them out of there; three matching shirts shoved into the bottom of Feferi's bag. He vowed he would never stoop so low as to match with the other two, but he already knew that was a lie.

The market stalls were starting to pack up, and Eridan and Sollux snuck away from Feferi's clutches as she began chatting to another troll. They wandered for a while in the darkening streets, watching as trolls slowly shut up their stores and ignoring whenever their hands brushed.

"We should get her a present," Eridan suddenly said, perking up and turning to Sollux. "Fef, I mean."

"No shit you mean FF," Sollux received a glare in response, so he showed more interest. "What present were you thinking?"

"Um. I'm not sure," was Eridan's helpful reply. Sollux rolled his eyes, and they both looked around, brainstorming. Struck by something he'd seen, Eridan rushed forward to a stall that was packing things away. Sollux followed and immediately knew what he'd noticed.

A small plush octopus that was in the hands of the merchant. Eridan struggled through expressing what he wanted, and by the time the troll understood Sollux was already holding out the money. Eridan let out an affronted noise as the exchange occurred, elbowing Sollux as they walked back.

"I saw it first! I should be giving it to her!"

"Too bad," Sollux poked his tongue out at Eridan, dodging when he reached for the plush.

When Eridan gave chase, he rushed ahead to where Feferi was looking for them, holding it behind his back.

"Oh! There you guys are. I was getting worried," she said, smiling at them and starting to lead the way back to her car.

"Wait!" Eridan said, finally catching up. Sollux held out the plush to her, only for Eridan to snatch it from him and hold it out to her himself. "I got this for you."

"WE got this for you," Sollux corrected, nudging him with his elbow. Feferi gently picked up the octopus and teared up.

"Oh... She's so cute..." she whispered, looking up to them with wet eyes. "I love her." Sollux grinned at a grumpy Eridan, who gave in and smiled as Feferi pulled them both into a hug. "You guys are the basst. I should take you on advenshores more often!"

"Fef, no- please let me sleep-" Eridan protested.

"You really should!" Sollux grinned, ignoring Eridan pinching him to squeeze them both closer.



Austin @skrelborns



Pen @twurlisart



Gaphie @Ga_phie



Moss @MossFellow



Andy K @ravioli_daddy

The Greatest Fanfic: LIFE

Gizmo
@ScrapyardGizmo

Dealing with Bronya leaving to exile and join the other, older Jades in the stars beyond was...a mixed bag for most of the Jades that knew her. Was the general cluster sad to see her go, knowing they'll miss her guiding hand and effective yet stern work ethic? Definitely. Are they yet proud of her, knowing she'll be serving a better, greater purpose, one that she's always dreamed of? It's not even a question.

Lanque and Lynera both didn't have much time to think on it, as they were sent up just a handful of wipes later. That left Daraya, whose fears of the future only began to grow along with their self-destructive tendencies after having their list of responsibilities only worsen and now under the watchful, scrutinizing gaze of Jades outside of their immediate circle, carefully dissecting their every move and action, waiting to deconstruct their persona and being that had at least been tolerated and allowed under Bronya's time, now ready to be turned into nothing but another green cog in those dark and suffocating caverns.

Along with them is Wanshi and Karako. Wanshi has...mixed feelings. Sure, Bronya and Lynera could be extremely strict, the latter even more so than the former, but they still cared. They still tried to be the best mentors they could be, and let her be who she wanted while she still could. Lanque may have been aloof at times and not always available, but when he was, Wanshi couldn't think of anybody else she would want as a friend who let her have some fun without fear of scolding. Except maybe Karako. Speaking of...

Karako definitely took it the worst. Can you blame him? He was personally raised by Bronya when he was naught but a runt who would've been slated for immediate culling. Lynera cared for him first out of obligation to Bronya, but then actually grew attached to him and began to worry and dote over him when the former wasn't around. Lanque always considered Karako a refreshing shock of purple (a tad ironic, considering it's Alternia) in a Jade saturated life, and, perhaps out of some intense brotherly bond, was among the best at pulling his weight when the mini clown needed to be hidden from the undeniably dangerous presence of the drones, beaten out only by Bronya, of course. Now it's just him, Wanshi, and Daraya.

Loathe as they all are to admit it, Daraya's gonna join them soon. It's a scary thought, and since it's hell planet number one, that's a pretty high bar to pass.

...

So what better way to put off impending fears of the future than by making the most of your time now by shirking your duties and spending some of it outside the stuffy and dark caverns!

Daraya, naturally, prefers to be alone, but Wanshi and Karako choose to travel together. "The difference between a brave soldier and a reckless one is how many Clanmates they have when travelling!" She would say. Naturally, her clown compatriot would respond with a sage honk, because. Well. That makes sense, y'know? You think he's gonna dispute information from his dear sister?

Anyways.

They usually make trips as a way to relax and indulge in interests in any way, with the paradoxically flimsy yet airtight excuse of not being one of the specially chosen cloistered Jades who have to report to the care of the Mother Grub at all hours for Wanshi, and the far more simple and easy excuse of 'he's a friend' for Karako. Which isn't really an excuse at all? It's more like a reason. He just is a friend, period. And since he's a clown growing into his caste-typical abilities, he's a damn useful friend to have around when higherbloods think Wanshi is easy pickings for being 'only' a Jade and Karako won't do anything because of how runty he looks.

It happens less often than you'd think, but more often than they'd like.

Really though, even without his growing powers, he'd still fight like hell to protect his sister from any salt sucking scum that tries to pick on them. Almost always the fish faces, Karako is beginning to find...

That ferocity serves them well as both a defense and a distraction for the fact that Wanshi is still very much capable of defending herself. They're a dynamic duo that way. A dynamic duo that could kick your teeth in and send you crying for lusus in nothing but a pusherbeat, no matter your caste. Of course, though, it's a good night when they don't have to prove it, because it means no conflict, no fighting for their lives, no running away and looking over their shoulders every ten seconds the next time they go out. It means they can just relax and live for a second, do what they want as they please, and luckily tonight is a night such as that.

Wanshi is back to her favorite spot, the Vast Vault Bookhive, now with Karako in tow. He's a good listener whenever Wanshi infodumps about her new ideas for fanfiction,

like a Soldier Purrbeasts and Alphasigil crossover AU in which Shadowseed must fight through a strange new world and discover some things about herself, set in the Light Planet of the aforementioned game. She's sure it'll bring in some brand new fans from the other series, and it's definitely to be her most ambitious project yet! The clown assures her that it will be and he will be among the first to read it. Of course, he's not only there to keep watch over her and listen to her talk, he also wants to do some reading himself. Being higher up in caste has the added benefit of being able to read some more...uncensored accounts. Not to say he can find a journal that just so happens to hold every rebel belief there ever was so some 'unlucky' loyal citizen of the empire can get 'brainwashed', but it does mean he can learn more about the history of clowns and how they specifically got this way.

For example, did you know that the practice of worshipping the Mirthful Messiahs was among one of several religions before the Great Imperial Unification? And that it's the only surviving religion from that time, reincarnated and recanonized to not be so blasphemous as to believe that the Mirthful Messiahs are somehow above the Empress and her highest blood? Some accounts even say that there's an overwhelmingly powerful artifact from those times that holds dregs of the old canon, a set of Joker Cards speaking profane and blasphemous messages hidden under their ancient slam poetry. Karako, for the most part, doesn't buy it. Call it 'heresy', but he's always felt disconnected from other clowns. Barring the fact he's been raised in the Brooding Caverns pretty much all his life, his experience with clown culture and expectations have purely been through what Bronya was able to get to him, such as the face paint and faygo. Has he, as a clown, felt a 'calling?'

A religious feeling connected to higher beings that watch over and reside to guide the purpleblood trolls to paths that ultimately serve the Empire?

Yes, actually. Comparing his experience and feelings to what he's heard and seen from other clowns, to what he's seen first hand in an actual church, full of its whoops, pixie dust, faygo, and slam poetry, however...he can't convince himself it's the same. Maybe that's why the mentions of an old canon interest him so much. Does he follow the old gods? Is his connection linked to so-called 'Joker Cards' that give different messages that speak against what the Empire wants? ...Did Bronya know? Was she trying to save him from becoming another grease-painted cog...?

Karako shakes his head, clearing his mind of thoughts that will only stress him out and remind him of better times, thoughts that would surely only make the tears in his eyes pour like an acid rain. Maybe he should just stick to Wanshi for now. Maybe he should just stick to what he knows; a trusting family and loyal friend, who he should stick with as long as possible. Eventually he finds her again, a messy pile of papers filled with drafts and ideas spread out in front of her as she combs through different books.

Sitting down next to her, she looks over and smiles, ready to tell him about some more ideas she's thought up, before noticing he looks a bit distressed.

"What's wrong? Did some fish face poke fun at you again? Oh, are we past our allotted time? Should we-" She's interrupted as Karako leans against her. He can't lay his head on her shoulder like before, having shot up like a weed those past two sweeps, but it's instinct at that point. "Aw jeez, what's up dude? You haven't looked this upset since Lynera finally packed up and left."

"Honk...honk?" He honks.

"Did Bronya...save you? Well, yeah. She didn't wanna see some poor grub get axed for no reason." Wanshi replies, but Karako shakes his head.

"Honk! Honk honk."

"Save you from...ohhh. Right. It's kinda hard to remember you are a clown clown, sometimes." She says, chuckling nervously a bit, dropping her voice a bit as to not catch anyone else's attention. "Well. I don't think Bronya would've thought that far ahead, nor would she have been able to, considering you were the first 'cullbait' in her infirmary. And she did let you have access to clown stuff so...maybe she was just hoping you'd take the clown stuff, and her lessons of being a good person, and...combine them?"

Wanshi shrugs, offering her best 'hope that helps!' look. Karako mulls it over in his head. It'd make sense but...something about what he read, about the idea of some ancient artifact that espouses ideas ultimately anathema to the Empire's goals, it sticks with him. It almost feels like...a calling. Like those Cards are specifically waiting for him. Do these cards hold the truth to his existence?

Does this make him destined?

He's shaken out of his reverie, literally, as Wanshi grips his shoulder. "Karako? Are you good? You got this really spaced out look and started saying these...things? Whatever they were, they sure weren't honks? Almost sounded like slam poetry." Befitting of the wonder lacing her words, Wanshi's eyes are wide and confused, but have a trace of excitement that the clown can see.

Karako decides to tell her what's up, explaining in a few choice honks the trouble that's been

wracking his mind. She listens intently, trying to understand as best she can. It comforts him a bit, a reminder that despite their significant differences they can still try to be there for each other as the two youngest in their immediate circle. While Karako will never truly understand the stress of her cavern duties like she does, and she'll always be a bit lost when it comes to his clownery and his conflict with it, they both help each other through thick and thin. They don't need to share blood color to have a hatchmate relationship stronger than Drone armor.

Wanshi takes a moment to digest the info she's been told, pondering for a moment that she's probably the only Jade blood who knows this forbidden clown info. "Well, if you do end up being this Chosen Clown who acts as the conduit for these Cards, I think you'll still be the silly clown who I've known since we were both little grubs in sopor pools."

She then gets him in a headlock and noogies his head furiously, giggling madly as he struggles, also laughing. Naturally they grab the attention of a particularly frazzled looking teal, who shoots them death glares strong enough to probably make a rustie drop dead.

"That's our cue to leave, I think." Wanshi says.

"Honk." Karako honks.

With that, they gather up Wanshi's papers and books and make their leave, giggling once they exit the building. And so it goes, nights like these. Ad nauseam until Ascension. But despite it all, as long as they have each other now, they'll have these memories to remember fondly later. A drive to keep going even when the dark, all encompassing void of space is choking and hateful. A hope for a better life, forever in their minds.

And who knows? Maybe in one, silent, unsuspecting sector of the universe, a runt of a clown will find an ancient artifact and raise a loud and bombastic Carnival of Carnage, and cheering him on will be a jaded troll with the heart of a Soldier Purrbeast.

"After Hours"



ArtsicFox @ArtsicFox



Miles @theonlycaliroll



Mild @mildcry



The Cat Herd @TheCatHerd



Pendicular @bisectro

what goes into a speech

Ria
@riastuck

Your name is Terezi Pyrope, and routine is something you've always slipped into easily. You don't mind being flexible, twisting and bending and adapting to whatever might be required of you. Actually, you like to believe that you're quite good at it. As long as you have enough leeway to mess around once in a while, stirring up excitement and indulging in your circumstances, it couldn't matter less to you.

The routine that has blanketed life on Earth C, though, has been.. Unnatural, to say the least. The sun's rays are disconcerting, the sky an artificial fruity blue. All the sights and scents and experiences being thrown at you from the get-go have been completely unorthodox- and in such quick succession, too. Your pan hasn't absorbed a single bit of it, as if it's all some big untruth and tomorrow you're going to wake up on the meteor, to strategy meetings and cans littering the halls and at least a semi-remote sense of what you consider normalcy. But so far, that hasn't happened, and you walk down the street grappling with the idea that someday, this routine will become your normalcy. For whatever reason, that projection tapers off in wisps, something about it just not lining up.

But today is different, you remind yourself with your chest puffed out, striding evenly down a stretch of sidewalk. After a week straight of finding places and settling into them, the tension permeating your return has swept the streets, and the gravity of your positions as legitimate and non-negotiable rulers (Gods!) has finally begun to settle neatly onto your shoulders,

an expected weight. Today you have work, and even if said work is to be done on this unnerving alien mimicry of an Earth, it's something to do either way. Jade knocked on your door bright and early yesterday morning, arms full of dull smelling paper bags filled to the brim with who-knows-what. She stood in the threshold peeking over that mountain of bullshit and explained with haste how really, really sorry she was that she wouldn't be able to make the Troll Kingdom ceremony being scheduled, and that she would if she weren't so really, really busy. To which you replied with a wink and a grin, letting her pluck out a file of paperwork and shove it square between your ribcage, officially burdened with whatever ceremonial preparations needed to go down before you present yourselves to your people.

This is how you find yourself at the door of Dave and Karkat's hive for the first time, grinning toothily at the scent of curtains drawn so tight they're askew. In one hand you carry the vanilla cream cardstock file she gave you, containing three stark white sheets of paper decorated with teeny tiny script and a red pen hanging off its side. You squeeze your other hand into a fist and raise it to the door, banging as annoyingly loud as you can. Your grin only widens as Karkat's muffled profanities make their way into earshot. The door swings open in a manner that is completely over-dramaticized, and a face stares back at you with all the refreshed enthusiasm of a squashed grape. Two hands station themselves firmly on two hips, and you stride right past him before taking a nice long whiff of the place.

"Great! Just invite yourself in, why don't you." Ear-bleedingly shrill. You missed it! "Not like you've ever had anything even remotely close to an understanding of privacy or- and personal space, and-"

"Can it, jeez!" You glare a bemused pair of deathly-sharp daggers his way. "You're interrupting my Pyrope-patented hive inspection. These things take focus."

Karkat wanders into another sectioned off part of the room, passing the couch and circling around a sleek island. He situates himself on a stool and glares back. "Yeah? Well what's your verdict?"

"Smells like cherries and two guys who've never seen an ablution trap in their lives."

At that he starts grumbling nonsense into the palms of his hands where his head rests, and as if on cue, his hivemate starts thumping his way down carpeted stairs. Dave's hair is damp and mussed, with a fluffy towel or two slung over his shoulder. When he sees you, he flips his shades down over his nose from where they rest on his forehead and offers up a two finger salute before disappearing through another doorway.

"Hey," his voice calls from somewhere in the hive, "TZ?"

"Yees?"

"Why are you in our house?"

"Get back over here and maybe I'll tell you!" Karkat snorts at that, and you make your way over to him.

Once you're seated by his side, you fiddle with the flap of the file, one side blank and the other decorated with an 'IMPORTANT' label written in cheap glittery olive. In all honesty, their place isn't too shabby. A fan hangs from the ribs closing off the arched ceiling, all rich and polished hardwood. The staircase lines the east wall, guarded narrowly by a bannister that had to be too elegant for either of their tastes.

"You've always been the speech guy," you declare. "Every second of your life you're being all sappy and heartfelt about something."

His brow furrows. "Yeah, well, that's all spur of the moment kind of shit! This is a political event. One that I would be thrilled to miss out on, by the way. Plus, you guys are bumbling idiots that act like getting yelled at is your life's goal. These are just.. Trolls."

Getting up there and addressing a crowd of trolls is just another unreal-seeming reality to add to your rapidly growing pile. Your collective hope for your race had depleted so quickly and so early on into your trip, the 'last alive' mentality really drilling itself even when Rose left cryptic reminders that there was still a chance for it to be revived. All these people who've grown up on this strange hunk of rock would be waiting for you, when it was just eight days ago you felt your toes in its grass for the first time and none of them even existed. Trolls belong on Alternia.

"Okay, so maybe you aren't the speech guy," Dave counters, "Cool, whatever. You are the book guy, though. You know words."

"Gimme that, then." Karkat caves and snatches the husktop off of Dave's lap, hauling it into his own and beginning to type.

You sit there for a moderately sized chunk of time, flirting with and discarding the idea of raising small talk more than once or twice. The two of you watch Karkat rewrite the same couple lines over and over again, key-tapping devolving into something more and more agitated as each highlighted line of text gets snuffed.

"What's up with Jade, anyway?" Dave offers up, a relieving distraction.

You shrug. "I'd say she's probably the one pulling the strings with this whole thing. Organizing. Meeting new people. That seems like her area of expertise to me."

"I don't blame her." Dave fidgets. "Not much witchy-spacey stuff to do anymore."

Not much mindy stuff to do anymore either, or timey or lighty or breathy.

"See," Dave starts, "that's another thing. All these people are probably going to end up revering us. Probably already do. We're like the messiahs. Hell, Karkat even more so. But to us it's just all run of the mill, you know? The standard teenaged experience was having powers and traversing universes. And now it's a big deal that we did that stuff, all of a sudden. Cuz' we're in a place where you don't need Sburb powers."

Karkat closes the husktop and contorts out of the hunchback position he had maneuvered himself into, sinking deeper into the bedding amalgam. "It's always been a big deal," he shoots back. "We just got to watch shitty movies and draw on cans while we did it."

At this point, you could either change the subject in as wild a manner as possible, or continue wading through the murky waters of an impromptu feelings jam with two of the most emotionally constipated friends you have. You say 'fuck it', and dive headfirst.

"Is Earth C anything like the old Earth?" Your tone guides the conversation back into what you hope is lightheartedness. Dave runs a hand through his stringy citrusy hair and thinks for a long and hard couple seconds.

"I mean, no, not really," he settles on. "Not at all, actually. I don't know how to describe it,

but it definitely feels like the product of a video game. That's for sure."

Karkat pipes up. "I mean, how did it even get like this in the first place? This whole planet is being raised like a bunch of humans. Hell, we're in a house right now. A house, in the fucking Troll Kingdom. It's just.. unnatural."

"Exactly! That's exactly what it is." You twist to face the two of them on your right, dropping your head into your hands. Maybe it's a product of being thrust into the physical antithesis of the environment that shaped your developmental years, or maybe it's the fact that you're all of a sudden being demanded too little to reach whatever fulfillment quota the game set a precedent for. Maybe you miss having this treasure trove of unlocked potential being teased throughout your journey, and maybe it's a little disconcerting now that it's all out in the open, nothing left to discover. Who are you when Alternia is dead and gone? Who are the people you miss without someone to miss them? If you aren't Mindy, and Rose isn't Lighty, and Dave isn't Timey, what even are you anymore? Not who you were before any of this, that's for sure. When you See, reach into the depths of your psyche in the way that used to be enlightening, this new chapter of your life is a neatly drawn line marked by simple objectives and rewards to reap. No secrets, no catches, no tangle of strings you need to pull and snip at in order to continue forging your path. It's underwhelming.

But even so, in front of you are two people who feel the same way. You're sure everyone feels the same way, at least to an extent, and in spite of the fact you haven't really talked to many of your friends since your victory. Dave and Karkat probably know the most about you out of anyone left on this rock; what you like, what you do, and at least an inkling of an idea as to what you feel. It's this weird kind of solidarity between

you and two people you don't think you got to know as well as you should have. At the very least, they wanted to get to know you.

"Actually," you declare, "I say we wing it."

Karkat's eyebrows shoot up. "Brilliant idea, professor! We go up there, make fools of ourselves, and then recede into our hives for the rest of time licking our wounds and watching shit movies."

"That's what you're going to be doing anyway, dude."

"Shut up, you two! No one is making a fool out of anyone. Writing up some snooty Lalonde-brand declaration of bullshit is what would make us fools," you insist.

"So we just start talking? About literally whatever comes to mind?" Dave takes a gulp out of his mug, peeking at you from over his shades.

"Duh!" It's sing-songy and pitched. "If we're going to be these people's Gods, our best bet is to get up there and show them all how big of a pair of losers you two are."

Karkat snarls and hurls a pillow across an unsuspecting Dave, K.O.'ing you square in the face and knocking your glasses askew. You cackle something loud and bright before grabbing your own and returning the favor. Soon, Dave escapes the crossfire and starts tossing his own shit into the mix.

The sky is too blue, the grass is too green, and your friends are just the right amount of annoying.



Will @wllted.gardens



Christian @RETOLimn



Andy @marigoldm0th



Pencil @thepencilriot



Koji @athebler

EXTREMELY illegal oblong meat product business

Gizmo
@ScrapyardGizmo

Out in the Beta-12 Orion sector, the odds of running into Imperial interference is low enough to the point where it's frequently visited by outlaws and wanted heretics, branded by the Empire as 'lost causes' and 'extreme dangers to Imperial society.' While many would think that it could be easy to swoop in with several Imperial Hunter-Culler squads led by expert Overfearmongers to set up a mass ambush and wipe out any heretics in one fell swoop, that isn't the case. See, the sector is known as a 'total technical deadzone' due to the fact that, within microsweeps of entering the sector with the intent to hunt down and destroy criminals, insurrectionists, and rogue elites, Imperial forces are met with "unmatched technical attacks and fearsome communication scrambling that leaves retreat as the only option."

More superstitious troops among the Empire have gone to calling it "the invisible black hole" due to the high mortality rate. Among the most common of strategies used to repel attackers is directing an overflow of power to the main warp core and engines, causing them to rupture and cause panic among the crew. Consumed by fear and confusion, the victim will try to escape via Faster-than-Light travel, causing complete molecular destruction upon arrival due to the aforementioned ruptured warp core. If it's not that, then the goldblood battery will have their mental and psionic shackles removed, allowing the energy to either fizzle out, overload, or in some cases, the battery will then wreak havoc and destruction in vengeance and electric retribution within the ship after obtaining complete control, usually also trying to shoot down and take out other ships.

Understandably, when faced with such overwhelming opposition and threat from a considerably small and insignificant area, people think there's some massive treasure or dangerous superweapon hiding in the sector, ready to be unleashed on hapless and unsuspecting Empire planets, right?

Nope. Not even close. The Beta-12 Orion sector is host to uninhabitable desert planets orbiting dwarf stars nearing the end of their life cycles. The most notable feature of it is the Rebel's Frond Nebula that resides near the border of it and the Beta-13 Lookout sector. It is an entirely unremarkable sector with nothing of importance to the Empire and only acts as respite and a waypoint for 'undesirables' and outlaws.

Which is why Mallek Adolov, The Techfang, loves it. The only trolls that drop by this sector anymore are scavvers and traders stopping by dead drops, criminals that need to lay low for a bit (or a while), and him. Better than being stuck on some damnable captain's chair with nothing to do commanding lowbloods who fear him too much to have any good conversation with while having to go where some idiotic indigo says to go even though there's nothing to DO or SEE and they TOOK HIS FUCKING RIG WHEN THEY DIDN'T FUCKING HAVE TO-

"Woah, buddy." He says to himself, shaking his head. "You got it back, it's all in your hands, don't worry."

Jegus, he sounds like a moirail for himself. Looking around the (admittedly cramped) cockpit of his Catfish-Class cruiser, he runs a prong over the dashboard and pats it some. He stole this beauty from some saltsucker who was showing it off and got some not-so-Empire-approved modifications done to it. A revolutionary new product in space faring technology, requiring no goldblood battery whatsoever and running purely off auxiliary gamma power cores that need just a simple solar recharge

from a local star. Like a portable, smaller, flying hive.

...Is he trying to sell this to someone? He's been in this thing for the past three sweeps, he knows it like the back of his claws, why the sales pitch? Mallek takes a second to think about who, if anyone, he would be selling it to since he's on this train of thought. It's not like he's a stranger to selling services. Hacking for hire, mercenary work, clandestine deliveries, odd jobs here and there all to survive one more sweep all for the hell of it. He's got no greater goals, he doesn't think. He hasn't seen any possible revolutions spark up, so there's no cause he can dedicate himself to. He isn't looking to amass some great army of unstoppable power, if he wanted that he'd just go back to his old ship and crew. Guess he'll keep doing what he's best at; hacking, hacking, and more hacking. He's good at it, he likes doing it, so might as well look for more opportunities for it.

Living moment to moment, doing whatever, aiming for just one thing...it reminds him of someone actually. Short, blunt horns, a simple jacket, bangs hiding eyes, and a small smile pop into his mind's lookstubs. Diemen Xicali. Burgundy blood who was simply looking to get by and eat oblong meat products.

A troll others should've looked up to, honestly. Who could argue with such simplistic wants and needs?

If Mallek was honest, he kinda actually really missed him. Out of all the people he had 'business' with, Diemen was the most consistent in terms of what he needed done and what he gave as compensation for doing a job well done. But in between all of that stuff, he actually just...grew to like him? Diemen was chill, willing to listen, and just cool to be around.

When he chose to stay at Mallek's pad for some reason (usually being that he was too tired to go anywhere else), he was pleasant company, and the two grew closer.

Which made it hurt way worse than Mallek was expecting when he remembered going out into space meant leaving behind his friend.

Mallek blinks and shakes his head, realizing his vision has gone blurry. Shit, had he been crying over that? He thought after all this time he had grown distant to it, and that the memories wouldn't elicit that kind of reaction out of him, yet here he was, wiping his eyes of the tears that formed. Ugh, he's been sitting around too long in one spot, the cruiser batteries were getting low anyways. With a few flicks of some switches and a couple button presses, he makes his way to the closest star to recharge. These kinds of trips are pretty much always quiet, which makes it all the more surprising when the radar blips and alerts him to another ship in the vicinity. Huh. Maybe he'll spot them as he gets closer-

Oh sweet wriggler Jegus what is that.

The good news is he spots them pretty much immediately. The bad news is he thinks it's a wandering circus troupe with bright neon signs and ostentatious colors. Just as he's about to flip some switches and ready for an all-out technical assault, he gets a message crackling through his comms. Probably an auto-message preluding to his doom at the hands of auricle-clot busting vuvuzelas and pies laced with chitin melting acid.

Which makes it even more surprising when the jingle he hears coming through isn't of circus whimsy and calliope playing. It reminds him of commercials that used to play back on Alternia, shilling out the new 'hip' and 'clout-worthy' items on the market, all for

the measly price of your dignity. This isn't any of that however.

"-or maybe you're looking for more exotic tastes, like an amalgamation of alien meat that gives your shout-cave an experience that's out of this world!" That statement is followed by a rim-shot. "So what are you waiting for, potential customer? Scoot yourself on over to Graciously Good Galaxy Grub and get you some Graciously Good food!"

It begins to repeat and as it does, his abdominal sausages start growling and making a ruckus, demanding Mallek to get some extraterrestrial sausages to satiate them. Eh, what the heck, better than waiting for some Imperial transport to take a wrong turn so he can pick it clean for rations that aren't just nutritional pastes that taste like rotten nothing. He pulls up closer to the other ship, noticing that it's larger than he thought and more like a moving station, considering he has enough room to land his craft on a designated space. Once the environmental scanner assures him that there's a bubble of breathable atmosphere around the station, he exits and walks up to the entrance, where there's a distracted bronzeblood checking something on their palmhusk. He catches their attention once he sits down on a stool in front of the window, a smirk adorning their face.

"Welcome to Graciously Good Galaxy Grub, scorpionblood. As a precaution, you with the Empire, buddy?" They ask.

"Nope, just a freelancing hacker for hire who's looking for some food." The bronzeblood stares at him, taking him in, before grinning and sliding forward a tablet with a menu.

"Then we're happy to oblige." There's a surprisingly wide array of options, almost too many to choose from, but Mallek goes with

an oblong meat product and side of fried tubers since he was thinking about a troll who was over the moons for them. Once the troll takes his order, Mallek decides to look around at the station, taking in the few people milling around. Most are eating and conversing, some are checking up on their ships, and a clown duo seem to be practicing slam poetry. The clatter of a tray next to him brings him back to the window and he has to double take at the sight in front of him.

"We got a roasted oblong meat product topped with grub sauce, caramelized grubion, and beans along with a side of fried tuber slices, along with a large grub cola, that'll be-" The troll looks up and does a similar double-take when he sees you. The two of you stay staring at each other like that, both slack jawed in awe, until the bronzeblood from earlier clears their throat.

"Ey, Diemen, you know this dude?" Holy shit it's actually him. It's Diemen Fucking Xicali.

"Mallek? Dude, is that you?" Diemen says, and it's like they're both back on Alternia.

"Diemen? Holy shit dude, you fucking made it! You're here, I thought I'd never see you again bro!" Diemen rushes forward and captures Mallek in a hug over the counter, which he returns with gusto. The bronze just shrugs and goes back to checking something.

"Oh, dude, you arrived at just the right time, I'm about to go on break! You can tell me all about what you've been up to! Holy shit, you're here!" And so he does. He tells his old friend about all the Imperial forces he's driven back, the strange deliveries he's done, the various hired protection for caravans and mercenary work he's done.

"Sometimes I would think about how I was usually the one doing the requesting, asking trolls like you to get various things for me or gather info and whatnot. When did you even get here, dude? Did you set this place up yourself?"

"Nah, I just escaped from my old ship 'cuz I had to be a cook for all these fancy pants highbloods. Nobody wanted any Savory Delights, dude! Not even the most chill of those freaky clowns! Felt like I was gonna go insane if I didn't try and at least see a Bunned Delicacy." He hasn't changed much, and that's honestly a good thing, Mallek thinks. "So me and a couple other rusties started a fire in the kitchen and ran while things were chaotic. We didn't even lose that many!"

"Thank gog you were able to make it. It's funny, y'know? I was thinking about you just an hour ago and...well, here we are!"

The two of them talk for a while, and it's almost like life is perfect. Like they don't need to worry about the Empire, or the bloodcaste, or anything.

It's nice. And he's here to make it even better.

For the first time in a while, Mallek Adalov relaxes.



Thank you once again for checking out
our zine :) We couldn't be prouder of
how it turned out!



June: done by Jude
Rose: done by Ronan
Dave: done by Koji
Jade: done by Ciel